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ABSTRACT

Since 1970, in response to a variety of external and internal pressures, many postsecondary institutions have undertaken projects to improve the quality of undergraduate education by rethinking what is involved in a liberal education and revising the process as well as the content of the education they offer. Innovative programs, instructional improvement centers, curricular changes, and faculty development projects have emerged. This essay summarizes the findings of a team of educators who visited eight liberal arts colleges that have received outside funds for institutional renewal. The authors studied the factors that encourage and inhibit institutional renewal, the strategies that seem most effective in bringing it about, and the evidence that exists when it has occurred, and have recorded observations and conclusions that may have relevance for other institutions and educators seeking to improve the quality of undergraduate education. (Author/LBH)

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RENEWING LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

Identifying, Planning, Implementing, and Assessing Institutional Renewal

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Report of the Project
On the Assessment of Institutional Renewal
Harry E. Smith, *Project Director*

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Introduction

Since 1970, in response to a variety of external and internal pressures, a large number of post-secondary institutions have been engaged in projects to improve the quality of undergraduate education by rethinking what is involved in a liberal education and revising the process as well as the content of the education they offer. Innovative programs, instructional improvement centers, curricular changes, and faculty development projects have proliferated as administrators and faculty, faced with declining enrollments and funds and institutional retrenchment, have sought to respond to these pressures to improve the teaching/learning environment. "Institutional renewal," the phrase used to symbolize these varied efforts, has become the goal of a large number of liberal arts colleges whose very existence is at stake.

Faced with a no-growth situation, tenured faculty need help in assessing their effectiveness and developing new teaching skills and interdisciplinary perspectives as students become more critical of the quality of the education they are offered. Administrators are increasingly recognizing that teaching improvement programs are not enough, that institutional, systemic changes involving revision of the curriculum, faculty reward system, student evaluation, and admission practices are required if their institutions are in fact to survive.

This essay summarizes the findings of a team of educators who visited eight liberal arts colleges which have received outside funds for institutional renewal. Studying the factors which encourage and inhibit institutional renewal, the strategies which seem most effective in bringing it about, and the evidences which exist when it has occurred, we have recorded observations and conclusions which may have relevance for other institutions and educators seeking to improve the quality of undergraduate education.

Factors in Institutional Change

Observers have developed, especially in the last two decades, inventories of factors which precipitate social change in general, and many have focussed upon institutions of higher education in particular. This essay poses a sharper (and, we believe, a more difficult) question: What kind of institutional change leads to genuine renewal of a college or university?

Our reflections upon institutional change have led us to distinguish between "occasioning factors" and "necessary conditions". The former are elements which frequently trigger change within an institution and may impel it on the way toward renewal. But individually or in combination these occasioning factors do not themselves cause institutional renewal or assure it. In contrast, there are a few factors which seem to be present and operating when there is decisive change. They are necessary but not sufficient conditions.

Occasioning factors

A number of occasioning factors were observed which contribute to change, providing important backdrops or occasions, the existence of which may be catalytic.

Economic factors seem highly significant. Financial pressures and declining enrollments characterized in varying degrees all the institutions studied in this project. (In one college, anticipation of a smaller student population, rather than an actual decline at the time institutional renewal was initially planned, helped to precipitate change.) It should probably be emphasized, however, that the "occasion" of economic duress, however impelling, seems insufficient by itself to bring about institutional renewal. Change may indeed be initiated, but it may lead to a dead end, to frenetic but basically directionless activity.

The presence of *consultants* may be an important precipitating factor. At their most effective, consultants skillfully tune in to the particular character of the institution so that their advice and leadership "ring true" within the community. They can be a major support to the administration in its efforts to create a climate conducive to change. On the other hand, hit-and-run consultants, marketing their particular nostrums, may precipitate change which turns out to be ill-suited and short-lived.

The sense within a college community that there is now an *improper fit between students and programs* may provide an occasion for change. The infusion of "new students," i.e. ethnically "new" to the institution; older, non-traditional students, etc.; and/or a recognition that the curriculum is "irrelevant" to the needs of the institution's traditional student body may precipitate change. But unless the implications of the mis-match between programs and students are fully grasped, the new curriculum may turn out to be farther from reality than its predecessor.

The existence of *student demand for change* may provide another significant opportunity to introduce change. It is interesting to note, however, that to our knowledge none of the institutions visited in this study identified student demand as a factor in motivating change. This suggests the relatively peripheral role of students in the recent renewal process in these institutions.

More important is *pressure for change emanating from the larger community:* the sense that the institution's linkages with the world around it (a large urban complex, for example) provide new occasions and needs for significant change.

Finally, we would stress the importance of *institutional self-appraisal.* An earnest, realistic self-examination seems to be supremely significant in establishing the need and rationale for change.

Necessary conditions

The first necessary condition is *decisive, appropriate leadership.* While in a large number of instances, we found this leadership initially embodied in one or a few senior administrative officials within the colleges visited, there were enough instances when renewal was initiated and sustained by one or several faculty, or even small faculty-student groups, to lead us to conclude that this necessary leadership can initially appear in almost any quarter of the college and can be either individual or collective. Our experience shows, however, that effective leadership is likely to come from either an administrator--the president or dean--or from influential faculty.

Proof of the leadership's effectiveness is manifested in the *means by which others are enlisted* in the effort toward renewing change and the *pace by which it is done*. Solo performances do not renew institutions, we concluded. Ever enlarging groups within the institution have to be drawn into the process. One can highlight this necessity by observing that whenever a gap exists between the leadership and the rank and file--whether between the president or other administrators, on the one hand, and the faculty or students, on the other; or between a committee working on a renewal effort and the rest of the college community--the efforts of "the leader" will increasingly be viewed with apprehension and engender resistance. Particularly if specific, concrete designs issue from the leadership without having been shared, developed and refined by wider circles within the college, the chances for failure to achieve renewal are very great.

Thus the leadership, whether individual or collective, must be diplomatic as well as decisive, inclusive rather than exclusive. Changes of the breadth and power that lead to institutional renewal most certainly do not occur until an adequate number of persons, a critical mass within the college, become convinced of the necessity for change. Engendering this consciousness and conviction is a principal task of leadership.

Equally crucial, however, is the early development in the change process of a *well-chosen concept, a program* on the basis of which renewing change will be attempted within the institution. Slogans, labels, or inspiring verbal challenges are insufficient. An artful, well-conceived, realistically described idea, program or design is indispensable to focus and channel the energy prompted by the conviction of the need for change. Without such a structural element expectations are frustrated and energies squandered. Within a reasonable period of time an adequate number of the college constituents must agree to proceed with the idea, program or design if renewal is to have any chance of realization.

Decisive leadership, sensitive to timing and coordination; a reasonably widespread conviction within the institution of the need for significant change; a beginning idea, design or program--these emerged from our reflections as necessary conditions if institutional change is to result in genuine renewal.

Signs of Institutional Renewal

How can one identify institutional renewal when it is taking place or has occurred, that is, a significant change which will hold and not abort, and which is not marginal, cosmetic, segregated, or simply the result of the "Hawthorne effect?"

The vital signs which we identified are described in general terms and need to be filled in with the specific educational intentions and especially the new program or design of the institution in question. For example, "structural changes" may translate in one institution as curricular reform, in another as off-campus centers, and in another as remedial education. The signs are not necessarily identical with the vitality of an institution or the quality of its intellectual life and learning environment. But these signs or evidences of renewal focus on the fundamental and structural changes which seem indispensable

if the broader change is to have some permanence. Inattention to these signs might allow the observer and the participants to overvalue surface or marginal changes. While an institution may not show all of the following signs, it must show most of them or its renewal will be fragile and likely abortive, even self-deceiving.

The following signs are evident if significant institutional renewal has occurred:

1. An increasing percentage of senior faculty, faculty in general, and students have become involved in concrete new efforts which are intelligently linked to the renewal effort. Over a period of years the involvement of faculty in particular should have increased from a small percentage to something like 20% to 40%, representing incorporation into the mainstream of the institution's life. There must have been corresponding changes in the styles, size, and nature of opposition to the new efforts on the part of faculty, administration, trustee members, and students. Changes in responses from students, as well as alumni and parents, will understandably be of a different rhythm and require a longer percolation time. The involvement in question must show up as alterations in the regular activities of individuals.

2. Effective and appropriate structural changes are evident which embody and support the renewal effort(s), including, in every case,

   a) appropriate concrete changes in the allocation of resources, with budgets and projections incorporating the sense of the new mission, e.g. the addition of some programs and the elimination of others;

   b) evidence of incorporation of the institution's new expectations of its members into decisions involving admissions, hiring, promotion, and tenure;

   c) other changes, not specifiable here, which in fact prove appropriate to the particular renewal in the institutions involved.

3. There are clear signs of vitality and interiorization by members of the institution. While human beings cannot be expected to embrace eagerly fundamental change in their lives, a total absence of signs of enthusiasm for the renewal effort is evidence that a change is not integrated into the loyalties of the participant members and is therefore likely to be or become marginal and ineffective. The particular vital signs will vary with different cases, e.g. significant new combinations of faculty, students, administration, and community members resulting from the renewal effort; recognition of new needs in consequence of the renewal effort, accompanied by the generation of new ideas, research, discussion among faculty and students; and the emergence of cooperative efforts.

Strategies for Institutional Renewal

On the basis of our observations, we concluded that effective strategies for institutional renewal seem to depend upon three interlocking factors: informed

and considerate leadership; participation and commitment of appropriate constituencies at the right times; and a sense of timing in the use of resources, making choices and the staging of events.

Decisive leadership is crucial, we observed, but it needs to be guided by *realistic appraisal of available options*, the facts and data descriptive of what is being led. The leader must describe priorities and make clear his/her own commitment to pursue them.

While change may be essential to survival, it is equally important to be able to survive change. The leader should develop ways to reinforce those who join the renewal effort. Promises should be framed in terms of the realities of resources and time. Honest opposition and the risks of trial and error should not be suppressed. The spirit of experimentation should be encouraged and rewards for achievement delivered frequently during the process.

Perhaps the primary leadership responsibility in the initiation of change is to frame cogently the community's options, to provide for and be a part of fair debate, and then to insist upon clear choices. The leader should advocate the choices to which his own judgment leads, but within a framework which tolerates and promotes the points of view of others.

The leader's credibility hinges upon appreciation of the distinction between manipulation and honest collaboration between the leader and the constituents, and the constituents' perception of the leader's understanding of this distinction. Most so-called "communication problems" arise from the failure of this understanding.

While ideas originate in individuals, institutional renewal depends upon the *rapid collectivization of the purposes, goals and processes.*

The purpose of constituency participation--of teacher-producers, student-consumers, and others--is their possession of the ideas and the development of their ownership commitments. The most effective approaches to engaging members of the college involve new mixes--of senior faculty with the younger; producers, consumers and managers; the institution and the external constituencies to which it relates, or should.

Concepts and visions should guide constituency participation to reach beyond the self-interests of individuals or groups, but at the same time the process of institutional renewal should promote the renewal of the individuals engaged in it.

The renewal process requires a *sensitive feel for the timing of events and combining of resources.* Leadership intervention should include the strategic use of seed money; engagement of larger forums, smaller groups, and individual talents; and determining when to compel decision.

Renewal may simultaneously result in change and in the reinforcement and strengthening of established values and traditions. The ultimate renewal is of the attitudes of the people toward the institution to which they are committed. Institutional renewal aims finally, we concluded, at the outlook and behavior of the persons involved.

Factors Inhibiting Institutional Renewal

Role of Consultants - Although some institutions which were studied found consultants useful in the initiation and development of programs, several colleges were hindered or misdirected by consultants. The "drop-in-drop-out" consultant is most likely to inhibit the process of change by imposing ideas and strategies which bear no relation to the real needs of the institution: at worst, this results in the uncritical adoption of an idea or program merely as a gimmick; at best, it wastes faculty and administrators' time in workshops that are in no way helpful to what they see to be their real task. A second hazard of the "drop-in-drop-out" consultant, even one alert to the needs and goals of the institution, is that even useful and appropriate ideas are not brought to development, as faculty and administrators find themselves trying to turn suggested ideas into actual programs without necessary guidance. A third difficulty which may result from extensive use of "drop-in-drop-out" consultants is the exposure of faculty and administrators to too many unrelated ideas, resulting in confusion and frustration.

Another kind of consultant--the "resident expert"--seemed to have proved more successful. When this kind of consultant had good rapport with the faculty and was available for extended periods of time, considerable progress in development of programs was effected. However, if the resident consultant appeared to the faculty as formidable, intrusive, speaking another tongue, or creating unwelcome extra work, then the process of change and renewal was seriously impeded.

Lack of sensitivity to clientele, new students, settings - Several of the colleges visited chose curricular reforms which did not seem to match their students' skill needs or motivational levels. One college, with a large minority population whose earlier educational experiences had led them to become passive learners, developed a competency program which required the students to suddenly become active participants, shaping their own learning. Without an adequate advising program, the students seemed generally confused. Another institution which recruited a relatively large population of older, less traditional students made no effort to incorporate these students into the life of the school, to use them as resource persons for the other students, or to consider them in any way in the development of courses or programs. In this instance, they were brought in primarily to improve the college's financial situation.

This lack of sensitivity seems to be a factor inhibiting successful institutional renewal because it excludes some groups from total engagement with the idea and mission of the institution and makes them indifferent or resistant to change.

Another institution adopted a series of programs entirely unrelated to its faculty's interests and preparation. Of the five programs proposed, only two were actually realized, and these two only in a minimal way. Another institution in a community of culturally-rich resources established a program that did not pay any special attention to the resources of that setting.

Conflict between internal and external pressures - When a faculty group designs a project which does not respond to the external realities of its context, a conflict may arise which threatens the entire project, even the institution itself. For example, one college we visited designed a curriculum project which

grew largely out of the faculty's political activism and ideologies in the late 1960's. By the time this program was actualized, however, the external world had changed and that compelling idea was no longer of as much interest to potential students or to employers or graduates.

In another case a college became so thoroughly engaged with the surrounding community that the internal integrity of its programs seemed threatened: the students complained of confusion and disorder, and the faculty seemed to have no sense of organizing purpose for the multiple outreach activities aimed to meet external demands.

No strategy for improving teaching - Occasionally a school will design a programmatic change, a change in student body, or a shift in mission without establishing for its faculty any means for improving their teaching within the new framework. Without an organized, systematic series of meetings, forums, or symposia, the faculty has no occasion for discussion of methodologies and objectives. Even if there has been sufficient input by the faculty into the design of the program, lack of skills to carry out the new approaches to teaching will often inhibit the implementation of the programs.

Threatening forms of assessment - In some curricular reforms (particularly competency-based programs) teachers are required to set up some kind of assessment procedures for their students. In the process, they learn that assessing learning means assessing teaching as well. When this revelation comes as a surprise, faculties are likely to feel threatened and to impede the implementation of CBE (competency-based education) until they have come to terms with this threat. At two colleges visited, for instance, faculty seemed to have "stalled out" in the creation of assessment procedures in CBE, and have learned that the development of assessment strategies often takes twice as long as anything else, requires twice as much consultation, and is met with twice as much resistance. If faculty are educated to this expectation from the outset, they are more likely to accept the difficulties without being thrown by them. This inhibiting factor must be taken into account because it is related to the teacher's most intimate sense of selfhood and effectiveness.

At one college, an outside "assessment expert" was brought in to take up residence on campus. At once, his presence was threatening to teachers who feared the establishment of an assessment activity and projected that fear onto this single person.

Excessive number of innovative programs - Although multiplicity of programs can be an effective strategy for effecting change, too many uncoordinated, random, and frequently changed programs can result in confusion of ideas, too heavy a workload, and, perhaps most damaging, a sense of discouragement among students, faculty, and administrators. They are denied the sense of success that comes from seeing results; there is no time for reflection, no sense of major goals being achieved.

Mistaking assertion for fact - A major difficulty at some of the institutions we visited resulted from the notion that an institution achieves renewal by developing a program for renewal. The acquisition of language and concepts, the

use of new and popular terms like "competency-based curriculum" and "cross-generational learning" were in themselves thought to have effected behavioral change. Sometimes even structural reorganization itself (changing the calendar, student population, or course requirements) was thought to constitute significant change, when in fact it was hardly more than the means to such change.

Unrealistic appraisal of faculty opposition by change teams - Some change teams, confronted with the need to take their proposal to a faculty body, seemed extremely fearful and defensive. They expected to be received negatively and as a consequence of that expectation, probably were. Or, as in the case of one team, their expectations led them to postpone the encounter, making it even more difficult to convince their faculty colleagues when they could no longer put it off.

Another related phenomenon is the overly confident change team which underestimates the amount of resistance it will encounter, moves too quickly, and then fails to present its proposal effectively. Still another is the change team which spends a great deal of time "politicking" in its attempt to sell its proposal in bits and pieces to key faculty members.

Mismatch of expected and actual rate of intrinsic and extrinsic payoffs - Some faculties may be misled into a too easy understanding of what is involved in curriculum reform (misled by a drop-in consultant or a single conference or workshop) and fail to make a realistic appraisal of how much time and effort will be required to effect change. If their expectations do not match the reality, the faculty is likely to feel frustrated and deceived by the rate and form of payoff and goals realized. Faculty also need to know that some curricular reforms, e.g. competency-based education, are open-ended change. Without this awareness, we noted, faculty interest in curricular reform may flag at critical times and lack the continued impetus toward completion.

Program obsolescence - Some faculties (conservative faculties especially) may invest a great deal of time and energy in the creation of a new program, e.g. as much as four or five years. When they have finished, and have taught the new curriculum for a year, they may discover that the program has become obsolete either in fact or in the perception of faculty and/or students. For instance, several colleges developed in the late sixties rather extensive and high-powered programs for highly skilled students, only to discover several years after their inception that students' skills were no longer up to the programs and that the faculties had to begin over. The programs matched the needs of students in the past, but failed to match current student needs. Those who have invested the greatest time and energy in developing such programs often feel threatened, angry, and resentful, refusing to do further work in curriculum development. A new effort may fail, we observed, because some faculty "own" pieces of an obsolete program and refuse to cooperate in any rebuilding process. Some faculty may even see new efforts through the "screen" of the old program, failing to perceive what is different about the new effort.

Failure to enlist faculty support - Perhaps the factor most detrimental to effective change which we noted was failure to enlist sufficient faculty support. In some cases, engaging faculty in the entire process of initiating and developing a new program would have been useful; in others, simply keeping

faculty well informed would have been sufficient. But in no case was the process of renewal successful when faculty felt alienated, manipulated, omitted from consultation, or excluded from plans and information.

Recommendations Regarding the Funding of Institutional Renewal

On the basis of these findings and observations, the following recommendations are offered to foundation and funding agency staff, project reviewers, and those preparing grant proposals:

1. Proposals for institutional renewal--under whatever rubric--should relate proposed changes to student needs, reflecting the involvement of faculty and students in their design, implementation, and evaluation.

2. Site visits should be made to institutions in the final stage of screening in order to investigate the authorship, ownership, and awareness of the proposal among the various constituencies and its prospects for effective implementation.

3. Proposals prepared and/or evaluated by outside consultants paid by the applying institutions should be given special scrutiny because of their frequent failure to reflect accurately the strengths of the institution or the changes effected.

4. Proposals should be in harmony with the basic nature and mission of the institution or represent a new departure which will not be ultimately unacceptable to several of its constituencies.

5. Special attention should be paid in funding proposals for institutional renewal to the institution's capacity to reallocate resources after the termination of the funding period, and to insure that the proposed changes will be continued.

6. Preference should be given to institutions which have already demonstrated evidence of a capacity for and commitment to change and are therefore open to significant renewal.

7. Grants for institutional renewal should reflect the institution's willingness to take seriously its physical location, community needs, and the effect of external factors on the proposed internal changes.

8. Special care should be given to the consequences and implications of specific curricular reforms since they can be far-reaching and institutions may not be aware of their significance, e.g. for advising students, evaluation of teaching, grading, admissions, community relations, etc.

9. Renewal of grants should be made only after evidence has been provided of substantial progress toward the fulfillment of the project's intended goals.

Background and Procedure

The Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has been one of the most active agencies in encouraging institutions to develop projects to improve the quality of teaching and learning, making available over $10 million a year for funding promising proposals since its inception in 1972. Funding only about 5% of the proposals submitted, FIPSE has made a unique contribution by stimulating institutions to give serious attention to self-renewal and requiring thorough evaluation of the projects it has funded. The sense of accountability on the part of the FIPSE staff about the effectiveness of their projects led them to provide funds for this project on the assessment of institutional renewal.

The Society for Values in Higher Education, a network of 1950 persons engaged in higher education as faculty, administrators, graduate students, and professionals, has had, since its inception in 1923, a deep concern about the quality of higher education, reflected most recently in its cross-disciplinary journal SOUNDINGS, its various conferences on college teaching, its interdisciplinary summer institutes, and its own Project for Institutional Renewal Through the Improvement of Teaching. Hence it seemed an appropriate group to sponsor a project on the assessment of institutional renewal, using as the basis for its study a group of eight of the fifteen institutions which received a total of $2.7 million in institutional renewal grants from FIPSE between 1973-75.

A team of eight participants was recruited by the Project Director, Harry Smith, during the summer of 1975. They included John M. Bevan (Vice President for Academic Affairs, College of Charleston), William M. Birenbaum (then President of Staten Island Community College and now President-elect of Antioch), Patrick Hill (Professor in the Department of Philosophy, SUNY at Stony Brook), Kristin Morrison (Professor in the Department of English, Boston College), John D. Maguire (President, SUNY College at Old Westbury), Pauline Tompkins (President, Cedar Crest College), Paul Ward (former Executive Director, American Historical Association), and Susan Wittig (Professor, Department of English, University of Texas at Austin). This group came together with three of the FIPSE staff, Director Virginia Smith, David Justice, and Alison Bernstein, and Jerry Gaff, the director of the Society's Project on Institutional Renewal through the Improvement of Teaching, for a weekend consultation at Airlie House in Warrenton, Virginia, on December 5-7, 1975, to examine the operational definition of "institutional renewal" and the characteristics of the institutions receiving FIPSE grants for institutional renewal, and to formulate the criteria they would use in assessing the institutions to be surveyed. The eight colleges suggested by the FIPSE staff and consenting to visits and conversations concerning their recent renewal efforts include Alverno, Barat, Bethel, Mars Hill, Ottawa, Our Lady of the Lake, Sterling, and Lone Mountain.

Between December and April, the eight project participants visited the eight colleges in teams of two for two day visits including extended interviews with faculty, students, and administrators. These consultants came together a second time with the FIPSE staff at the Belmont Center at Elkridge, Maryland, on April 2-4, 1976, to share the reports of their campus visits and draft this report. In trying to set down their conclusions about the factors which they

found had precipitated, inhibited, and facilitated institutional renewal on the campuses they visited, the project participants were aware of the limited size of this sample, the varying stages of renewal they observed, and the unique characteristics of the colleges visited, e.g. mostly small, liberal arts colleges with denominational affiliation or history. They were also aware of the impressionistic nature of their observations and the danger in drawing from their research any final conclusions which might be used to determine future funding or as a yardstick to measure success. Nevertheless, all of the project participants felt that the insights gained about institutional renewal had sufficient value to be shared with the FIPSE staff, the institutions visited, foundation staffs, and others concerned about the process of change in post-secondary education.

We are grateful to the administrators and project directors in the eight colleges studied for their willingness to host the visitors and to report their experiences, thus providing the data which are the basis for this project report.

June 18, 1976